

Why Is a 10% Sewer Rate Increase Proposed?

The City of Santa Barbara operates the El Estero Wastewater Treatment Plant and the system of pipes and pump stations (sewer system) that transport wastewater from homes and businesses to the Treatment Plant. On an average day, the City treats approximately 8 million gallons of wastewater to a level that is safe for discharge to the ocean.

In 2008 and 2009, the City experienced an increase in the number of spills from the sewer system. While the spills were generally small in volume and often completely cleaned up, the City undertook several initiatives to reduce the number of overflows, including the following:

- Increasing the amount of sewer pipe that was cleaned,
- Improving the cleaning method, and
- Changing the process used to decide which pipes needed cleaning.

The City also worked with a specialized consulting firm to develop additional strategies to further reduce spills and cost-effectively manage its expensive wastewater system infrastructure.

In 2010 and 2011, the number of spills was decreased by 70% (from 42 to 12). In 2011, we had no spills that reached creeks or beaches. Staff worked quickly to contain and recover the wastewater spilled from the 12 small spills (less than 100 gallons) with an outcome that resulted in approximately 200 gallons of wastewater not recovered because it had soaked into the soils. A single house on a septic system can safely discharge more than this to soils every day.

In February 2011, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper, a local environmental organization, notified the City that it intended to file a lawsuit over the sewer spills from the City's sewer system in the previous five years. From the out-set, the City Council, acknowledging that Channelkeeper and the City shared a common commitment to improved system performance, made every effort to work collaboratively with Channelkeeper to resolve its concerns without the need for costly litigation.

Despite these efforts, Channelkeeper filed its lawsuit. The City and Channelkeeper entered into the federal court mediation process. This effort resulted in an agreement between the City and Channelkeeper for the City to continue its successful efforts to reduce sewer system spills and its long standing Sewer Main Repair and Replacement Program. The City typically replaces at least 2.6 miles of pipe per year. The agreement imposes an added requirement for the City to repair or replace an additional two miles of pipe per year for up to five years. The agreement also requires the City to pay all costs associated with the litigation, including attorneys' fees, and includes cost caps that protect rate payers for unexpected expenses.

To pay for an accelerated schedule of sewer line replacements (the extra 2 miles per year), the Channelkeeper settlement requires a sewer rate increase of 6% above the originally projected 4% increase, resulting in the 10% rate increase currently proposed.